

## **How public education has evolved in Wellesley**

By **Bella Wong**/Guest Columnist

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The primary goal of the Wellesley High School has been to develop, educate and graduate students who gain the knowledge, skills, curiosity and desire to participate as active citizens in a global society. With over 90 percent of students going onto higher education, a secondary goal has been to prepare students to meet the requirements of an ever-increasingly competitive college admissions process.

The high school educational program is the base onto which we build elements of quality instruction, strong leadership, collaborative and respectful learning communities, adequate resources, and conducive and safe learning spaces. Together, they enable the attainment of our goals.

The current educational program can be traced back to when the Wellesley public schools first opened their doors. The core academic subjects continue to be math, language arts, history, social studies, science and language. Further, there has been continued recognition of the importance of the arts, fitness and academic applications such as business and tech ed. Yet today's program is significantly different from its origin.

### **Impact of legal mandates on program and instruction**

The most dramatic changes in education can be attributed to legal mandates. The most recent is the shift to a mandated standards-based model where schools are accountable to insure every child achieves proficiency performance levels as defined by state benchmarks. This is embodied in the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 as manifested in the MCAS high-stakes testing; and again in the federal legislation, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Because standards-based education focuses on outcomes for every student, it requires individualized assessment for more effective differentiated instruction and is therefore more teacher intensive. Smaller class size has become of greater importance and emphasis. For the past decade, Wellesley High School has implemented a class size guideline of 22 students per class to effectively deliver current teaching methods and curriculum.

Smaller class size does not necessarily translate into smaller classrooms. Differentiated instruction to accommodate a variety of learning styles is enhanced by being able to

shift within the classroom among a variety of instructional practices and strategies: teacher or student-directed, flexible grouping, or project based work. Flexibility to do this is impeded in a classroom too small or designed inappropriately.

A second major legal impact has been the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1975 that requires free and appropriate public education for all students regardless of disability. For most of our special needs students, the appropriate education is inclusion in the regular classroom. The needs of this population underscore the importance for differentiated instruction as well as smaller class size. For some of our students, different classrooms and an even lower student-to-teacher ratio is required.

Title IX, enacted in 1972 provides gender equity with respect to opportunities and facilities for athletics and fitness programs. Successful programs offer boys and girls a variety of options to participate on a team, promote personal development, share in school spirit and develop community pride. With the increase in opportunities, participation has grown significantly.

### **Ongoing assessment and improvements to program**

The educational program is dynamic. Continual assessment and improvement have made Wellesley High School a strong and vibrant learning community. Each core academic subject undergoes an in-depth review regularly. The review involves an assessment of Wellesley internal practices against current best practices and results in modifications to the curriculum.

In addition to ongoing assessments to the curriculum, advances in applications of technology to facilitate learning have transformed instruction like no other tool before it. It has increased the opportunity for differentiated instruction, accessing or conveying information, achieving greater understanding of material, applications, and connections inside and outside of the classroom. As technology continues to evolve, it continually challenges educators to find ways to fully reap its potential.

### **Importance of the extracurricular program**

Lastly, the educational program of today is more than just the core academics, but encompasses extracurricular activities. The extracurricular program includes, for example, drama, music, and athletics; and has evolved substantially since the origin of the Wellesley public schools. The most significant part of this evolution is the role extracurricular activities now play in the experience of our students. For the vast majority of students, these endeavors are critical to their social and emotional

development and will help define who they are. College applications place a great deal of importance on what students choose to do beyond the classroom in addition to their academic performance.

In summary, the WHS educational program (including the *extracurricular programs*) provides the basis for the delivery of an excellent education. Further, it is the basis for the specifications used in developing the plans for the High School Project. The educational program drives the architectural education program, which sets forth the high school building's spatial requirements and is the subject of a subsequent article.

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